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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether various measures of communication competence would be more positively associated with constructive message strategies than with either destructive or avoidance strategies, and whether individuals would prefer a partner to be constructive rather than being constructive themselves. Subjects were 114 college students who were asked to find partners (spouses, romantic intimates, close friends, friends, or relatives) willing to help them complete the survey. The dyads completed a questionnaire concerning one specific interpersonal conflict that they had experienced and the behavior each partner had displayed during that conflict; a measure of relational competence designed to measure both self-competence and other-competence during a conversation; and an interpersonal communication satisfaction inventory. Results showed that perceptions of interpersonal competence were positively related to the use of constructive message strategies in situations of interpersonal conflict. Constructive behavior was positively associated with perceptions of self-competence, other-competence, and relational competence. In addition, perceptions of competence were linked to the use of constructive strategies by one's partner as well as oneself. (FL)

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PERCEIVED COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND CHOICE OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT MESSAGE STRATEGIES

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PERCEIVED COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND

CHOICE OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT MESSAGE STRATEGIES

Competent interaction has long been a fundamental concern of both scientists and humanists. This is no surprise since the development of interpersonal communication skills is considered requisite to adequate functioning in society (Larson, Backlund, Redmond, & Barbour, 1978; Dance & Larson, 1976; Ruesch, 1972). As Breen, Donlon, and Whitaker (1977) indicate, "the pure enjoyment of life in the company of other human beings is directly related to the level of interpersonal competence. On the other hand, deficiency in interpersonal skills ... may also be the most prevalent source of discord and unpleasantness in our personal lives" (p.1).

Defining Competence

Although the construct of competence has been defined in diverse and myriad ways (Spitzberg, 1981), some consistent elements have emerged in the communication literature. From an interpersonal communication perspective, competence (1) involves the appropriate and effective use of messages; (2) is related to functional outcomes; (3) is relational in nature; (4) is reflected in a constellation of skills; and (5) is contextual in nature. Because no single theoretic orientation strongly unifies current conceptions of competence, these elements are grounded in diverse conceptual and empirical literature.

At the most basic level, appropriate communication fulfills functional demands and information requisites of a communicative situation (Larson, 1978). But additionally, communication is appropriate to the extent that it does not violate social and/or interpersonal rules governing the verbal, relational, and environmental context of interaction (larson,

1978; Larson et al., 1978).

Communication is effective when it is successful in fulfilling communicator objectives. Such objectives may range from explicit instrumental goals to tacit subconscious functions (e.g., identity management). In other words, competent interaction is inherently functional--it serves human needs and goals (Bennis, Berlew, Schein, & Steele, 1973; Clark & Delia, 1979; Cupach & Spitzberg, 1981; Larson, 1978; Larson et al., 1978; Roloff, 1981).

The functional nature of communication suggests that "communication effectiveness implies the enhancing or facilitating of certain outcomes" (Larson et al., 1978, p. 3). Communication is effective insofar as communication functions are fulfilled; i.e., desirable outcomes are achieved. Hence, a complete understanding of communication competence necessitates an investigation of communication outcomes as well as process. The competent nature of communication process is necessarily reflected in the outcomes/effects of interaction.

Perhaps the most important assumption regarding competence is that it is relational in nature. This implies that one may be personally effective in achieving goals, but "may be incompetent in an interpersonal sense if such effectiveness precludes the possibility of others accomplishing their goals" (Wiemann, 1977, p. 196). Competent interpersonal communication is exemplified by cooperative interaction that allows both persons to achieve satisfactory outcomes (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1981; Pearce, 1976; Phillips & Metzger, 1976; Schuetz, 1978b; Scott & Powers, 1978; Spitzberg, 1981). As Brandt (1979) has noted, recent conceptualizations of compe-

tence by communication scholars (e.g., Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Pearce, 1976; Wiemann, 1977) "suggest a perspective in which the importance of goal achievement, communication skills, and sensitivity to both situations and other persons are equally stressed" (p. 225). In short, competent interpersonal communication is prosocial as well as effective. Furthermore, since an individual is only competent in the context of a particular relationship, it is important to account for both dyad-members in the assessment of interpersonal communication competence (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1981; Spitzberg, 1981; Steffen & Redden, 1977).

Another assumption regarding competent communication is that it is manifested in a constellation of skills. The skill components of interpersonal communication competence are defined by three generic categories: other orientation, behavioral flexibility, and conversation skills. Other orientation is a significant indicant of competent communication (Argyle, 1969; Feingold, 1977; Kupke, Hobbs, & Cheney, 1979; Pearce, 1976; Wiemann, 1977) and is particularly relevant to the relational view of competence (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1981). Competence literature typically cites specific skills that enhance other orientation. These include empathy and role-taking (Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Bochner & Yerby, 1977; D'Augelli, 1973; Farber, 1962; Foote & Cottrell, 1955; Kelly, Chase, & Wiemann, 1979; Phelps & Snavely, 1980; Weinstein, 1969; Wiemann, 1977), social perspective-taking (Hale & Delia, 1976; Swanson & Delia, 1976), listening (Bienvenu, 1971; Cushman & Craig, 1976; Hipple, 1972; Larson et al., 1978; Pearce, 1976; Phelps & Snavely, 1980), attentiveness (Norton & Pettegrew, 1979), communication sensitivity (Neal & Hughey, 1979), and interaction involvement

(Cegala, 1978). Also related to other orientation is identity maintenance (Goffman, 1959; Pearce, 1976; Weinstein, 1966)—"the notion that competent communicators act in ways which maintain, support or confirm the identity of the other" (Parks, 1977, p. 19). Other oriented confirming behaviors include expressions of recognition, acknowledgement, endorsement, empathy, support, and affection. Several recent studies suggest that communicators who display openness, candor, attentiveness, animation, and personal attention in their conversations elicit perceptions of attractiveness and communication effectiveness (Brandt, 1979; Dow, Glaser, & Biglan, 1980; Kupke, Calhoun, & Hobbs, 1979; Kupke, Hobbs, & Cheney, 1979; Feingold, 1977; Norton, 1978; Norton & Pettegrew, 1979).

The second class of skills is behavioral flexibility which implies the ability to appropriately adapt communication to the situation and environment at hand (Baldwin, 1958; Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Cushman & Craig, 1976; Hale & Delia, 1976; Hart & Burks, 1972; Hart, Carlson, & Eadie, 1980; Moment & Zalesnik, 1963; Montgomery, 1981; Ritter, 1979; Steffen & Redden, 1977; Swanson & Delia, 1976; Wiemann, 1977). Competent communicators avoid overly rigid or stylized behavior. To do this requires a sufficient behavioral repertoire--a strategic arsenal of potential behaviors from which a communicator can draw. As Pearce (1976) maintains, "communication competence is limited to the extent that a person cannot see alternatives to his or her behavior" (p. 16). A large and diverse strategic repertoire allows one to flexibly adapt to ever-changing contexts.

The third class of skills for competent communication may be labeled conversation skills. The most important dimension of conversation skills is interaction management (Argyle, 1969; Knapp, 1978; Wiemann, 1977).

Larson and his colleagues (1978) provide a clear definition:

> Interaction management is concerned with the "procedural" aspects that structure and maintain an interaction. These include initiation and termination of the encounter, allocation of speaking turns, and control of topics discussed. Competent interaction management is the ability to handle these procedural matters in a manner that is satisfactory to all participants. (p. 22)

Hence, interaction management relates directly to utilizing appropriate mechanisms to coordinate conversation. But also basic to conversation skills is the willingness and ability to engage in interaction. Communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1970), anxiety, or unwillingness to communicate (Burgoon, 1976) can inhibit an individual from participating in interaction competently--even if that individual possesses other necessary skills.

The final assumption made here is implied in the previous assumptions--i.e., competent communication is contextual in nature. Precisely what constitutes appropriate and effective behavior in interaction is contingent upon constraints and exigencies of the communicative situation. This suggests that communication competence is not a cross-situational trait. Rather, an individual is usually more competent in dealing with some social situations while being less competent in dealing with others (Larson et al., 1978; Powell, 1979; Wiemann & Backlund, 1980).

The role of situation in communication behavior is widely recognized. Because messages are inherently ambiguous, they cannot be appropriately interpreted apart from situations and relationships. Communication behavior unfolds in interaction according to norms, rules, conventions, and expectations endemic to a particular social situation. Empirical research supports the belief that social situation exerts a significant impact on the selection of communication strategies (e.g., Lustig & King, 1980; McLaughlin,

Cody, & Roby, 1980; Miller, Boster, Roloff, & Seibold, 1977; Roloff & Barnicott, 1978).

The literature on communication competence also attests to the importance of social situation. In reviewing several epistemological frameworks for studying communication competence, Powell (1979) concluded that the influence of situation is a common theme. Indeed, communicative appropriateness and behavioral flexibility exemplify a concern with selecting and implementing communication strategies commensurate with a particular interaction context. Thus, it is particularly important to inspect the relationship between social situation and communication behavior. As Powell (1979) maintains, communication competency theory will be stifled until situational effects are recognized and incorporated into competence research. What is required is the defnintion of "higher order situational forms" in which individuals can optimize their communication behavior (Powell, 1979). To meet this need, social-psychologists and communicologists have attempted to develop taxonomies and identify dimensions of social situations (Cody & McLaughlin, 1980; Forgas, 1976; Magnusson, 1971; Powell, 1979; Wish, Deutsch, & Kaplan, 1976; Wish & Kaplan, 1977). Another crucial element in the development of communication competency theory is the identification of appropriate and effective communication behaviors within various situational forms (Powell, 1979). In other words, in a given context, what constitutes competent communication behavior? This is the task of the research reported here.

Competence in Situations of Interpersonal Conflict

One important situational context in which the question of competence arises is that of interpersonal conflict--which may be defined as an ex-

pressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals and/or scarce resources (Frost & Wilmot, 1978). Research by Powell (1979) revealed interpersonal conflict as a situational cluster of dimensions--i.e., a higher order situational form which requires unique communication patterns (different from other situational forms). Of particular interest to communication scholars are the strategic message choices made by interactants in conflict situations (Simons, 1974).

Competence in communication is clearly relevant to handling conflict. Indeed, most discussions of conflict assert or imply a distinction between constructive and destructive conflict processes (e.g., Deutsch, 1969, 1973; Frost & Wilmot, 1978). The most basic criterion for judging whether or not a conflict interaction was constructive inheres in the outcome of the conflict; specifically, were the conflictual parties satisfied with the results? (Deutsch, 1973). The greater the competence of communicators in a conflict, the greater the propensity for achievement of mutually desirable outcomes. This follows directly from the very definition of competent interaction. Furthermore, the hallmark of competence is the selection and implementation of appropriate and effective communication strategies. Communication is the mechanism through which parties achieve their functional objectives. Sillars (1980c) recently tested a subjective expected utility model of compliance-gaining message strategies. In line with the relational nature of competence, he found that both the persuasiveness of a strategy and the effects of a strategy on an interpersonal relationship affect the perceived likelihood of using a particular compliance-gaining message strategy. But empirically, the direct relationship between perceptions of competence and choice of interpersonal conflict behaviors remains largely unexplored.

Consequently, the general question guiding the present research project is: What constitutes perceived communication competence in situations of interpersonal conflict?

There is almost no literature that directly relates the variables of interpersonal communication competence and conflict behavior. Noted exceptions are two rhetorical case studies by Schuetz (1978a, 1978b). In one study, Schuetz (1978a) explicated the notion of argumentative competence, and illustrated it in Henry Kissinger's negotiations during the Yom Kippur War. Schuetz maintains that argument is the key mechanism by which negotiators mediate conflict. Strongly influenced by a constructivist perspective, she sums up the nature of argumentative competence as follows:

> ...a competent arguer negotiates conflicts skillfully when he or she defines situations holistically accounting for the complexity underlying the issues and understands the perspectives of others; analyzes situations with complex cognitive orientations that predispose one toward understanding other perspectives, taking roles, and choosing from a large repertoire of strategic options, infers causality in complex ways accounting for the contingent probability and hence uncovers options resulting from diverse personal and situational attributions; and chooses from a large array of strategies and tactics derived from their complex interpretation of the conflict. (p. 10)

This description of competence is certainly consistent with the more generic definition of interpersonal communication competence. In another essay entitled "Communicative Competence and the Bargaining of Watergate" (1978b), Schuetz attempted to demonstrate that Nixon, Haldeman, and Ehrlichman were relatively incompetent with respect to their bargaining and conflict resolution skills. Again reflecting the relational nature of competence, she concluded that "In situations of conflict, as in other communicative events, the competent communicator 'engages in cooperative interaction that permits both persons (factions) involved to achieve their

goals'" (p. 114). Although this analysis seemingly ignores zero-sum situations, it can be easily extended. Where goals are diametrically opposed, competence would dictate a willingness and skill to compromise.

Conflict literature generally considers prosocial/integrative/"Win-Win" strategies to be superior (Burke, 1970; Filley, 1975; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Pruitt & Lewis, 1977; Roloff, 1976; Warschaw, 1980). This seems particularly true for conflict in interpersonal relationships because the conflict process (i.e., communication strategies and tactics) directly affects relationship development and stability (Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Cupach, 1980; Krain, 1975; Roloff, 1976). A conflict handled in a prosocial manner not only enhances outcome potential, but also provides a superior antecedent condition for future disputes between partners (Filley, 1975; Roloff, 1981). In short, in an interpersonal conflict, parties are concerned with the issue of dispute, and with the future of the interpersonal relationship.

Some research indicates that the use of constructive conflict message strategies results in desirable outcomes. In a study of roommate conflicts, Sillars (1980a, 1980b) found that integrative conflict strategies (marked by open information exchange and neutral or positive affect) were associated with greater satisfaction with the partner and a greater likelihood of conflict resolution than were distributive or passive strategies. Use of integrative strategies was negatively associated with conflict duration. These results are corroborated somewhat by the findings of Falbo and Peplau (1980). They discovered that personal satisfaction with the relationship was positively associated with th use of direct power strategies, whereas "less satisfied individuals are likely to use more indirect strategies, such as hinting" (p. 625). Finally, Koren, Carlton, and Shaw (1980) found that "couples who were satisfied with outcomes tended to show responsiveness to each other's influence efforts and minimize the use of criticism" (p. 464). Similarly, conflict resolution was significantly pre-

dicted by responsiveness, minimal criticism, and exploration of possible solutions.

Rationale/Hypotheses

Conflict behavior which facilitates open information exchange and recognizes both personal and relational goals most clearly comports with the conceptualization of interpersonal communication competence. Such behavior may be called constructive (Cupach, 1980; Deutsch, 1973) and is consistent with the labels prosocial (Roloff, 1976) and integrative (Sillars, 1980a). The competent communicator seeks to negotiate a mutually acceptable definition of relationship in interaction (Wiemann, 1977). Hence, interpersonal communication competence should foster the use of constructive strategies in conflict situations. Moreover, the use of constructive conflict message strategies is consistent with the facets of competence reflecting other orientation and behavioral flexibility. The following hypotheses are therefore posited:

H_1: Self-competence (i.e., one's self rating of competence) will be more positively associated with one's own use of constructive conflict message strategies than with destructive or avoidance conflict message strategies.

H_2: Other-competence (i.e., one's competence as judged by his/her conversational partner) will be more positively associated with one's own use of constructive conflict message strategies than with destructive or avoidance conflict message strategies.

H_3: Relational competence (i.e., one's self-competence plus other-competence ratings) will be more positively associated with one's own use of constructive conflict message strategies than with destructive or avoidance conflict message strategies.

It is assumed that the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) operates in situations of conflict. Hostile behavior often engenders a hostile response, just as positive messages are likely to elicit a positive response. Positive reciprocity is consistently cited as a salient criterion of good

marriages (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977; Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974). Reciprocity of negative messages is found to be much more likely in distressed marital couples than in nondistressed couples (Gottman, 1979). And in a recent study of self-disclosure, Hosman and Tardy (1980) found a significant relationship between reciprocity and perceived competence. Those who failed "to reciprocate an initial high-disclosure message were seen as highly incompetent" (p. 28). Consequently, the above hypotheses may be extended to a prediction of one's partner's behavior. That is, the greater the perceived competence of an individual, the more likely that individual's partner will engage in competent behavior.

H_4: Self-competence will be more positively associated with one's partner's use of constructive conflict message strategies than with destructive or avoidance strategies.

H_5 Other-competence will be more positively associated with one's partner's use of constructive conflict message strategies than with destructive or avoidance strategies.

H_6 Relational competence will be more positively associated with one's partner's use of constructive conflict message strategies than with destructive or avoidance strategies.

Previously, it was argued that a full understanding of competent communication requires the examination of communication outcomes. Interpersonal communication satisfaction (Hecht, 1978a, 1978b, 1978c) has been identified as one significant criterion outcome of interpersonal communication competence (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1981). Cupach and Spitzberg (1981) additionally found that perception of a conversational partner's competence was a better predictor of one's own communication satisfaction than perceived self-competence. Since constructive conflict message strategies are thought to be associated with competence, they should also be associated with interpersonal communication satisfaction. The other orientation dimension of competence further

suggests that an individual would prefer his or her partner to be constructive and prosocial even more than him/herself. Put another way, persons derive greater satisfaction when their conversational partner is competent (i.e., other oriented, flexible), as compared to putting forth the effort to be competent themselves. Ergo, the following hypotheses:

H_7: Communication satisfaction will be more positively associated with one's own use of constructive conflict message strategies than with destructive or avoidance strategies.

H_8: Communication satisfaction will be more positively associated with one's partner's use of constructive conflict message strategies than with destructive or avoidance strategies.

H_9: Communication satisfaction will be more positively associated with one's partner's use of constructive conflict message strategies than with one's own use of constructive conflict message strategies.

Method

Respondents

One hundred fourteen student volunteers were obtained from communication courses at two universities and one community college located in the Southwest. Each student was asked to find a willing conversational partner from outside of class to participate with them in a "take-home" survey. Thus, there were 228 respondents in all, constituting 114 dyads. Of this group, approximately 55 percent were female. About 73 percent of the sample fell within the age group of 16-25 years. The dyadic relationships reported by individual respondents included spouse (16.2%), romantic intimate (34.2%), close friend (18.9%), friend (7.5%), and relative (10.5%).

Procedures

Student volunteers were offered class credit for participating in this study. In all, 166 questionnaire packets were distributed. Of these, 129

were returned (77.7%), and 114 were adequately completed for data analysis purposes (68.7%). Volunteers were instructed as follows:

> Enclosed in this packet is a take-home survey. Specifically, you are requested to choose someone from outside of class to answer the enclosed questionnaires with you. The partner that you choose should be someone you (a) know fairly well, and (b) interact with on a fairly regular basis. This person might be a friend, a relative, a roommate, an intimate, a co-worker, etc. The person should not be a casual acquaintance or stranger. Enclosed are two identical questionnaires--one for you and one for your chosen partner to fill out. Specific instructions are included with each questionnaire; please read them carefully. When you and your partner are finished responding to all of the questions, each of you is to seal your questionnaire in one of the smaller envelopes (containing the completed questionnaire) in this packet and return to your instructor as soon as possible--preferably the next class, but definitely within a week. All responses are strictly anonymous.

Students were also told that they could receive a summary of the research results by submitting their name and address to their instructor on a separate sheet of paper.

Each individual questionnaire consisted of general instructions, one open-ended question, 161 semantic differential and Likert-type scales, and five demographic items.

Instruments

The first set of questions focused dyad-members on a specific interpersonal conflict that they experienced. The instructions read:

> The following questions are in reference to a recent conflict (i.e., significant disagreement) that you and your partner have had with one another. You should be thinking of the same conflict episode as your partner. Therefore, discuss with each other what particular situation you will be referring to in this questionnaire. It is important that both you and your partner refer to the same situation and time frame. WHEN you have agreed on a particular conflict, THEN answer the questions below individually (on your own).

After describing the topic of their conflict, respondents completed a revised version of the interpersonal conflict tactics and strategies (ICTAS) scale (Cupach, 1980). This instrument contained 55 statements representing

descriptions of the respondent's potential behavior in an interpersonal conflict situation. Respondents indicate on a seven-interval scale the extent to which they agree or disagree that each item describes their behavior in the particular recalled conflict. In a prior study, a 42-item version of ICTAS factored into three conflict strategy categories: destructive tactics (e.g., insult the other person, use threats, throw something); constructive tactics (e.g., cooperate with the other person, compromise with the other person, trust the other person); and avoidance tactics (e.g., try to change the subject, avoid the other person, ignore the issue) (Cupach, 1980). Thirteen items were added to ICTAS for the present study to (1) increase the comprehensiveness of potential conflict behaviors represented by the [illegible] scale, and (2) increase reliability coefficients for each of the three factors.

ICTAS scale items were submitted to principal factor analysis with orthogonal rotation. The number of rotated factors was based upon two criteria: (1) a minimum eigenvalue of 1.0, and (2) Cattell's (1966) scree procedure. Both three- and four-factor Varimax solutions were interpreted. In the four-factor solution, factors one and two were clearly interpreted as destructive tactics and constructive tactics respectively. Factor three consisted of items such as "trick the other person," "try to embarass the other person," "tease the other person," and "try to make the other person jealous." This factor was labeled <u>active avoidance</u>. Factor four included the following items: "avoid the other person," "avoid the issue," "try to postpone the issue as long as possible," and "ignore the issue." This dimension was considered a <u>passive avoidance</u> dimension.

Since factors three and four seemed conceptually related, a three-factor solution was examined. Factor one was the destructive tactics dimension;

factor two was interpreted as a general avoidance dimension (including items from both avoidance factors in the four-factor solution); and the third factor clearly represented constructive tactics.

The three-factor solution was retained for the sake of parsimony and maximal factor reliability. Each factor was defined by items loading at least .50 on that dimension with no secondary loading greater than .30. Additionally, any item with a primary loading of at least .45 accounting for at least twice the variance of the second highest loading was retained. Only loaded itmes for each of the three factors were used in subsequent data analyses. Table 1 presents the retained items and their factor loadings.

Internal consistency of each factor was computed using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability for factor one (destructive tactics), consisting of 14 items, was .86. Factor two (avoidance tactics) consisted of six items and achieved a reliability of .71. Factor three (constructive tactics), having seven items, demonstrated a reliability of .75.

Respondents then completed Cupach and Spitzberg's measure of relational competence (MORC) (1981). MORC consists of two similar scales: ratings of self-competence and other-competence. The self-competence scale elicits one's judgments about one's own competence in a given conversation. Subjects responded to 28 statements describing their behavior in the recalled conflict episode. Reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was calculated to be .89 in the present investigation.

The other-competence scale assesses an individual's perception of his or her conversational partner's competence in a given conversation. This becomes the partner's other-competence score. The other-competence scale

contained 27 statements describing the respondent's conversational partner's behavior in the recalled conflict episode. In the present study, other-competence achieved a reliability of .93.

The next instrument contained in each questionnaire was Hecht's (1978b) interpersonal communication satisfaction inventory. This instrument is a reliable and convenient outcome measure of the interpersonal communication process. It contained 19 items descriptive of the recalled conversation. Reliability was .88 in the current study.

All three of the above scales--self-competence, other-competence, and interpersonal communication satisfaction--were comprised of seven-interval Likert-type items. All items were scaled from one (strongly agree) to seven (strongly disagree). Positively worded items were reversed before data analysis so that higher scores were interpreted as higher levels of competence and satisfaction. Missing values for each item were coded as "four," the neutral mid-point.

Data Analysis

Hypotheses one through eight predicted that various measures of competence (including the outcome of communication satisfaction) would be more positively associated with constructive message strategies than with either destructive or avoidance strategies. It was also predicted in hypothesis nine that an individual would prefer his or her partner to be constructive as opposed to that individual being constructive him/herself. These hypotheses were tested by calculating *t*-tests of the differences between correlation coefficients for correlated samples (Hotelling, 1940). The critical value of the test statistic was 2.576 because (1) each test was one-tailed; (2) degrees of freedom were equal to 225 (i.e., n - 3); and (3) the level of significance was set at .005. The conservative alpha level was established to protect against the inflated experiment-wise error rate associated with multiple *t*-tests.

Results

In all cases, the correlation between competence and the use of constructive message strategies was positive; while the correlation between competence and use of destructive strategies was negative. In addition, all the correlations between competence and use of avoidance strategies were negative. Table 2 presents the correlations among measures of competence and conflict message strategies.

Hypothesis one concerned the relationship between self-competence and conflict message strategies. The correlation between self-competence and constructive conflict strategies was .270. This relationship was clearly more positive than the correlations of self-competence with destructive strategies (r = -.540, t = 9.334) and avoidance strategies (r = -.397, t = 7.750). Consequently, hypothesis one was supported.

Hypothesis two predicted that other-competence (i.e., an individual's competence as assessed by his/her dyadic partner) would be more positively associated with constructive conflict message strategies than with destructive or avoidance strategies. Other-competence was more positively associated with the use of constructive strategies (r = .282) than with the use of destructive (r = -.365, t = 6.798) or avoidance (r = -.149, t = 4.661) conflict strategies. These data supported the second hypothesis.

Hypothesis three was also supported as relational competence was more positively associated with constructive message strategies (r = .342) than with destructive strategies (r = -.548, t = 10.529) or avoidance strategies (r = -.322, t = 7.490).

Self-competence was also more positively associated with one's partner's use of constructive message strategies (r = .041) than with destructive strategies (r = -.313, t = 3.561). However, the difference between self-competence and constructive strategies versus self-competence and avoidance strategies (r = -.100) was nonsignificant (t = 1.457). Thus, hypothesis four was partially supported.

The fifth hypothesis projected that other-competence would have a more positive relationship with one's partner's use of constructive message strategies (r = .397) than with other's use of destructive (r = -.443, t = 9.500) or avoidance (r = -.172, t = 6.454) strategies. The t-tests supported these predictions.

Hypothesis six was supported as relational competence demonstrated a more positive correlation with constructive conflict message strategies (r = .294) than with destructive message strategies (r = -.476, t = 8.558) or avoidance message strategies (r = -.173), t = 5.088).

Hypothesis seven predicted that communication satisfaction would be more positively associated with one's own use of constructive conflict message strategies (r = .306) than with the use of destructive strategies (r = -.418, t = 7.830) or avoidance strategies (r = -.242, t = 6.085). The findings supported this prediction.

It was also predicted in hypothesis eight that communication satisfaction would be more positively associated with one's partner's use of constructive strategies (r = .245) than with destructive strategies (r = -.309, t = 5.662) or avoidance strategies (r = -.132, t = 4.025). The data supported hypothesis eight.

Hypothesis nine was not supported. It was predicted that communication satisfaction would be more positively associated with one's partner's use of constructive conflict message strategies (r = .245) than with one's own utilization of such strategies (r = .306). This was clearly not the case. The difference between the correlation coefficients was nonsignificant (t = 0.919)

In summary, hypotheses one, two, three, five, six, seven, and eight were all supported by the data. Hypothesis four was partially supported, while hypothesis nine failed to receive support.

Discussion

Competence and Conflict Message Strategies

Collectively, the findings of this research indicate that perceptions of interpersonal communication competence are positively related to the recalled, self-reported use of constructive message strategies in situations of interpersonal conflict. Constructive behavior was positively associated with perceptions of self-competence, other-competence, and relational competence. Furthermore, perceptions of competence were linked to the use of constructive strategies by one's conversational partner as well as oneself. Of the three competence measures, relational competence (i.e., self-competence + other-competence) demonstrated the strongest association with one's own use of constructive strategies (r = .342). However, other-competence was the strongest predictor of one's partner's use of constructive strategies (r = .397). This suggests that the hypothesized reciprocity effect in the enactment of prosocial behavior is more contingent upon the perception of one's partner's competence and constructive behavior, and less contingent upon one's own self-perception of competence. In other words, "A" is likely to reciprocate "B's" prosocial behavior because "A" perceives "B" to be competent (i.e., "B's" other-competence

predicts "A's" competent behavior). Of course the evidence for reciprocity per se is only indirect here. Static questionnaire data is a weak form of support for the dynamic effect of reciprocity.

A related and consistent finding was that perceptions of competence were inversely related to the use of destructive conflict message strategies. Relational competence had the strongest negative correlation with both one's own use of destructive strategies (r = -.548), and one's partner's use of such strategies (r = -.476). Thus, it seems that if an individual is relationally competent in a conflict interaction, this should minimize the propensity of that individual's partner from engaging in destructive conflict behavior. This is consistent with literature on marital conflict regarding reciprocity of behavior (Gottman, 1979; Raush et al., 1974). But as expected, the disinclination to engage in destructive behavior is even more pronounced for the individual perceived to be relationally competent.

It should be noted here that a social desirability response bias could have affected the data (e.g., Kilmann & Thomas, 1977). Respondents have a tendency to report using constructive conflict strategies because they are perceived to be socially appropriate. By the same token, individuals are often reluctant to admit using destructive tactics such as force, threats, and physical aggression. Examination of descriptive statistics for conflict strategies and competence measures suggests that this problem is not severe in the current study (see Table 3).

Avoidance strategies were also consistently related to perceptions of competence in an inverse fashion—but in all cases, to a lesser degree than destructive strategies. The fact that avoidance behavior was more positively associated with destructive strategies (r = .371) than with constructive strategie

(r = -.065) may be due to the fact that most respondents had relatively intimate relationships with their dyadic partners. Engaging in conflict when it arises on serious issues (rather than avoiding it) is more important in intimate relationships than non-intimate ones. Conflict avoidance typifies the first stages of relationship development (Frost & Wilmot, 1978), is more likely in low-commitment relationships (Fitzpatrick & Winke 1979), and tends to be frustrating and dysfunctional in advanced stages of intimacy (Bach & Wyden, 1968; Oden, 1974). Since this study focused on conflict in interpersonal relationships, it is not surprising that the relationship between avoidance strategies and competence was a negative one.

It is also not surprising that the inverse relationship between perceptions of competence and avoidance strategies was not as great as the negative relationship between competence and destructive strategies. It is more likely that avoidance is occasionally an appropriate strategy in particular interpersonal conflict situations than it is that destructive strategies are appropriate. Clearly, the weak correlations for avoidance strategies (with competence) suggest that the appropriateness of avoidance in interpersonal conflict is highly situational in nature (Cupach, 1980). Avoidance behaviors may constitute an effective temporary strategy, whereas destructive behaviors are rarely appropriate--except where one's intention may be to sabotage a relationship. Overall, the competent communicator is one who typically <u>engages</u> in interpersonal conflict in a constructive and prosocial manner.

Naturally, there are alternative explanations for the low magnitudes of the correlations between competence and avoidance behaviors. One explanation is that the instructions were so definite and specific that they created a demand characteristic such that respondents reported very "definite" and "specific behaviors; this could have resulted in neglect to report the more ambiguous

strategy of avoidance. More likely is the possibility that conflict involving constructive and destructive behaviors are perceptually more salient and, therefore, more readily recalled. This is especially possible since respondents were focused on a particular conflict episode, were asked to be specific, and were asked to report on a significant disagreement. If this perceptual bias is at work, the result is an underestimation (and hence, underrepresentation) by respondents of the extent to which avoidance behaviors actually occur.

Taking into account the magnitudes of the correlation coefficients for avoidance conflict strategies provides a clearer picture of their nature. In all cases, the correlations between perceived competence and avoidance strategies were smaller than the associations between destructive strategies and competence. Generally, in interpersonal conflict where there is a reasonable amount of intimacy, avoidance of conflict on important issues is perceived to be incompetent, though not as incompetent as using destructive strategies. Furthermore, the low magnitudes of the correlations of avoidance strategies with perceived competence suggests that the use of such strategies may be competent or incompetent, depending upon the context. Avoidance behaviors in interpersonal conflicts tend to be more situational in nature with respect to perceived competence, whereas the normative judgments about constructive and destructive behaviors are more stable. But keeping in mind that the data of the present study are confined to conflicts in interpersonal relationships, and noting that avoidance was more closely associated with destructive (versus constructive) strategies, it is fair to assume that avoidance is perceived to be incompetent more than competent in interpersonal conflict. What will be particularly interesting to investigate in the future is how contextual variables such as topic importance mediate perceptions of competence when avoidance

message strategies are utilized.

It is curious that the variance in perceived competence attributable to the various conflict message strategies ranged from two to 30 percent. Assuming that the message strategies represent actual communicative behavior, we are led to question what else determines perceptions of competence?? Are there factors equally or more important that affect perceptions of competence in recalled conversations? Post hoc data analysis revealed that a linear combination of constructive, destructive, and avoidance strategies accounted for about 23 percent of the variance in the criterion of interpersonal communication satisfaction. Adding competence measures to the regression equation nearly doubled the amount of variance in communication satisfaction accounted for. This lends further credence to the idea that something other than perceptions of behavior in recalled conversations contributes to perceptions of communication competence. This points to an intriguing path for future research.

Communication Satisfaction and Conflict Message Strategies

Interpersonal communication satisfaction has been previously identified as one strong criterion outcome of perceived communication competence (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1981). The current study replicated this finding. The single most significant predictor of one's communication satisfaction was their partner's other-competence (r = .77). The second strongest predictor of communication satisfaction was one's partner's relational competence (r = .69). Both of these results make intuitive sense; the biggest determinant of my communication satisfaction is my perception of my partner's competence. When my partner is competent (i.e., other oriented, flexible), I am happy.

Consistent with the results regarding competence and conflict message strategies, communication satisfaction was more positively associated with the use of constructive message strategies than with destructive or avoidance

strategies. This was true for both, one's own use of constructive strategies, and one's partner's use of such strategies. This lends additional support to the link between perceived communication competence and the outcome of communication satisfaction. Additionally, the results confirm that satisfaction is a relevant outcome for the situational form of interpersonal conflict: the use of constructive message strategies results in the desirable outcome of interpersonal communication satisfaction.

Hypothesis nine predicted that one would experience greater communication satisfaction when alter utilized constructive message strategies, as opposed to when self used constructive strategies. This hypothesis was not supported. The difference in communication satisfaction for one's own use of constructive strategies versus one's partner's use of constructive strategies was nonsignificant. Thus, one was just as satisfied in performing constructive behaviors as having his/her partner engage in such behaviors. Also, the highest correlation with constructive conflict message strategies was an individual's perception of his/her partner's competence (r = .397). These findings seem to reflect the reciprocal and contingent nature of interpersonal transactions. Moreover, they suggest that something else other than communicative behavior accounts for perceptions of competence; one is more satisfied when his/her partner is perceived to be competent, compared to one's self being perceived as competent. But, an individual is not more satisfied when his/her partner engages in constructive conflict behavior--one is equally satisfied whether he/she or his/her partner uses constructive conflict strategies.

Limitations and Future Directions

A number of limitations circumscribe the validity of the findings in the current study. The sample used was certainly not generated randomly. As with most ex post facto research, self-selection bias is inherent. All respondents in this investigation were volunteers, and may therefore be unique as a

group in some way. In addition, the representativeness of the sample is restricted in terms of age and geographic location.

Perhaps the most significant limitation of the data is due to biases associated with self-reports. Perceptions of behavior in recalled conflict episodes may not accurately reflect actual conversation behaviors. Further, the kind of behavior that is recalled, as well as the type of conflict situation that is remembered, may be biased. It is also unclear to what extent frames of reference are similar for different couples experiencing interpersonal conflict. The normative significance attached to a particular behavior by one dyad may be substantially different from another dyad.

A number of future directions to extend upon the current research are logically salient. First, additional situational forms need to be researched in depth. This will allow the comparison of behaviors and outcomes in different classes of situations, which will, in turn, facilitate the development of more precise theory of interpersonal communication competence.

Second, other outcomes of competent interaction must be investigated. More work needs to be done in the way of conceptually and operationally defining appropriate functional outcomes of various situational forms. Establishing which specific outcomes are relevant to particular situational forms will enhance the identification of appropriate criteria for judging competence in different settings.

Third, the self-report methodology utilized in the current research needs to be compared and validated with behavioral observation data. While self-report methodology enhances the ecological validity of data, internal validity is questionable given the biases of self-reports.

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TABLE 1:

Interpersonal Conflict Message Strategies:

Varimax Factor Loadings for Retained Items

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Insult the Other Person	.57*	.14	-.06
Calmly Discuss the Issue	-.57*	.00	.18
Use Threats	.50*	.18	-.13
Shout	.71*	.00	.03
Make the Other Person Feel Guilty	.61*	.19	-.02
Act Defensive	.49*	.04	-.02
Punish the Other Person	.56*	.26	-.14
Be Hostile	.72*	.03	-.16
Get Angry	.74*	-.14	.05
Lose Your Temper	.78*	.03	-.03
Escalate the Conflict	.61*	.16	.02
Criticize the Other Person	.72*	.09	-.16
Intimidate the Other Person	.58*	.17	-.07
Call the Other Person Nasty Names	.52*	.14	-.13
Avoid the Issue	.07	.52*	-.17
Pretend to be Hurt by the Other Person	.24	.51*	-.04
Try to Postpone the Issue as Long as Possible	.09	.48*	-.08
Tease the Other Person	.22	.50*	.08
Ignore the Issue	.07	.58*	-.12
Try to Make the Other Person Jealous	.30	.55*	.00
Compromise with the other Person	-.16	.01	.49*
Explore Alternative Solutions	-.14	.03	.46*
Seek a Mutually-Beneficial Solution	-.12	-.15	.56*
Reward the Other Person	-.01	.28	.52*
Negotiate with the Other Person	.01	.06	.67*
Seek Areas of Agreement	-.13	-.03	.56*
Express Your Trust in the Other Person	-.27	.03	.55*
EIGENVALUES	9.43	3.75	2.45

*indicates primary factor loading.

TABLE 2

Correlation Coefficients Among Measures of Competence and Conflict Message Strategies

	SC	OC	RC	CMS	DMS	AMS
Self-Competence (SC)	1.00	.299	.759	.270	-.540	-.397
Other-Competence (OC)		1.00	.849	.282	-.365	-.149
Relational Competence (RC)			1.00	.342	-.548	-.322
Constructive Conflict (CMS) Message Strategies				1,00	-.234	-.065
Destructive Conflict (DMS) Message Strategies					1.00	.371
Avoidance Conflict (AMS) Message Strategies						1.00

TABLE 3

Descriptive Statistics for Measures of Competence,

Conflict Message Strategies and Communication Satisfaction

Scale	Mean	Std. Dev.	# of items	Avg. item mea
Self-Competence	144.89	25.60	28	5.175
Other-Competence	129.29	31.64	27	4.788
* Constructive Conflict Message Strategies	25.15	8.61	7	3.592
* Destructive Conflict Message Strategies	64.61	17.41	14	4.615
* Avoidance Conflict Message Strategies	34.31	7.24	6	5.718
Communication Satisfaction	86.41	22.35	19	4.548

* Lower scores indicate greater utilization of conflict message strategies.